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AUTHOR Tidwell, Charles H., Jr.
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Fools Rush In: Developing Cross-cultural Sensitivity Using Film-based Group Projects

Charles H. Tidwell, Jr., Ph.D.

Andrews University

Berrien Springs, MI 49104

Phone: 616 471 3155

E-mail: tidwell@andrews.edu

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Fools Rush In: Developing Cross-cultural Sensitivity Using Film-based Group Projects

Abstract

Although role playing games and self-awareness surveys are typical methods of developing cross-cultural sensitivity, this presentation advocates the use small group projects focusing on feature films such as *Fools Rush In* as an effective class or training exercise to develop sensitivity to other cultures. Despite some disadvantages including time constraints, the advantages include a clearer visualization of theory and concepts, a more specific cultural focus often missing from more traditional techniques, and an important entertainment factor. In addition to describing the methodology used to incorporate feature films into the classroom, illustrations are used stemming from student group projects based on *Fools Rush In*.

Descriptors

Feature Films, Group Projects, Student Projects, Cross-Cultural Training, Cross-Cultural Sensitivity, Intercultural Communication, Experiential Learning, Diversity, Simulations, Role Playing, Copyright Issues, College Education, Higher Education, Business Administration Training. Corporate Training

Identifiers

Cross-Cultural Sensitivity

Fools Rush In: Developing Cross-cultural Sensitivity Using Film-based Group Projects

Although cross-cultural training is increasingly a part of classroom and workplace programs, its success may be somewhat illusory. Textbooks from elementary through graduate levels typically include multicultural components. Business, communication, counseling, health, and teacher education programs, to name a few, usually include cross-cultural training as a core competency. Most corporate HR offices offer multicultural or diversity training, particularly when corporations have a global base. Despite such education, cultural conflicts in the United States (especially after the tragedy of September 11) appear more the norm than the exception. Other than the fairly widespread acceptance of different cultural cuisines (e.g. Chinese, Greek, Indian, Mexican, and Thai restaurants), large areas of the United States still remain relatively homogenous, albeit with increasing pockets of cultural difference imbedded throughout.

This may be illustrated with just a brief example from the 2000 census data for Berrien County in southwest Michigan where only one township happens to be significantly multicultural, largely because it is a university town that attracts a multicultural population (U.S. Census Bureau). The majority of the neighboring townships and cities are either largely Anglo-American or African-American strongholds. Despite the diversity initiatives of local corporations such as Whirlpool, cultural tensions remain both in the workplace and in the community.

Generally, it is only in major urban areas that multiculturalism is a significant facet of most people's every-day experience. Yet the census projections inform us that multiculturalism will be the norm in the next generation. Thus, there remains a need for

effective cross-cultural training as well as on-going research into which methods are most effective in delivering that training.

Key Problem: Developing Sensitivity

A key problem underlying current cross-cultural training is the apparent difficulty of developing a significant level of sensitivity to other cultures. Even though the demographic trends forecast the need for such training within the United States (as well as for the increasingly global workplace), the problem may lie in the training itself. Researchers and trainers alike are increasingly aware that it is not sufficient to focus on the cognitive aspects of culture, to merely identify and list diverse cultural traits. It is also essential to develop empathy towards those who differ from us. As one recent study noted, "Both contact and knowledge are necessary for the development of a multicultural orientation" (Diaz-Lazaro, 2001). This focus on sensitivity is not a recent issue. Sandra Fowler (1994), who helped develop Bafa Bafa, one of the more widely used cross-cultural game simulations, comments that the emphasis on cultural sensitivity reached its "zenith" during the Peace Corp movement of the 1960s. She further notes that "In the last decade of the 20th century, almost all intercultural training includes a strong experiential component and a cognitive orientation."

This concern for developing sensitivity is not just a matter of making changes in students or in the workplace. It is also an issue of changing trainers. As Jian Zhang (2001) recently pointed out, "Facing the challenge of educating these increasingly culturally and ethnically diverse learners begins not only with a change in the management, pedagogy, and instructional delivery system, but also with a change in designers, trainers, or teachers." Another recent study also decries the disparity between

practice and principle. As MaryLou Ramsey (2000) suggests in her recent study of multicultural training in the field of counseling, "we have yet to practice what we preach in multicultural counselor education and training."[1]

Objectives and Approaches

A common intent of many intercultural communication courses or cross-cultural training seminars is a conscious attempt to develop a significant level of sensitivity in those who have just been trained. For instance, a standard objective in my intercultural communication course is "promoting understanding between disparate cultures" (Tidwell, 2001). In an ad hoc survey of half a dozen other recent intercultural communication course syllabi, I found similar objectives. Developing sensitivity is often done by end-of-course assessment surveys or through methodologies which are intended to promote sensitivity such as role playing games, journaling, the involvement of guest lecturers from other cultures, or, as emphasized in this presentation, film-based group projects. In many intercultural communication courses, the focus is often cognitive and theoretical – an identification and analysis of basic cultural patterns and differences, perhaps through a study of the individualism / collectivism or the power distance dimensions identified by Geert Hofstede or a review of high and low communication contexts developed by Edward Hall (as summarized by Chen and Starosta, 1998). While cognitive approaches in isolation do not appear to improve sensitivity or identification, it

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[1] Several other recent studies on the role of media in cross-cultural training , primarily from the counseling discipline, have addressed the issue of multiculturalism. See Diaz-Lazaro (2001); Higgins and Dermer (2001); Tyler and Guth (1999).

should be noted, however, that such theoretical studies remain an important base on which to develop sensitivity.

For cross-cultural training to be effective, however, learning needs to be more than an intellectual exercise, knowledge which may be quickly forgotten or at least set aside when students or workers are confronted with the reality of multicultural encounters. Cultural sensitivity, the ability to identify at a personal level with another culture, typically requires a more individualized approach, one inherently missing from an explication of theory. In addition, a visual, narrative approach stemming from the use of feature films, particularly when opportunities for first-hand experience are limited, may be essential to develop effective cross-cultural sensitivity.

Typical methods of developing cultural sensitivity include the use of role playing games, the administration of self-awareness surveys, or as suggested by Carlos Diaz-Lazaro (2001), using guest speakers from other cultural backgrounds. However, an alternative technique I have been using for the past three years is the viewing full-length feature films. This has been both an in-class experience and a small group project exercise.[2] Basically, I have found feature films such as *My Family, The Joy Luck Club,* or *Fools Rush In* to be an effective sensitivity training tool when they are used in connection with small group projects that include follow-up presentations to the full class. Such film-based group projects allow the integration of academic concepts, promote a visualization of theory, provide a specific cultural focus missing from the more

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[2] See "*Gung Ho* and Other Movies: Using Feature Films in Intercultural Communication Courses" which focuses on the value of full-length feature films as in-class exercises (Tidwell, 2000).

traditional techniques, and, at the same time include an important entertainment factor which enhances classroom and seminar training.

Critical Issue: Active versus Passive Learning

There are several critical issues which teachers and trainers need to be aware of when attempting to enhance cultural sensitivity, whether through role-playing games and simulations or by the use of feature films as part of a training or classroom exercise. As a number of studies have noted, active involvement is paramount to the learning process. However, the typical lecture or training presentation generally focuses on acquisition of knowledge. A negative outcome is a tendency towards passiveness on the part of the student / trainee. Although his focus is primarily on marketing students in a study-abroad program, Charles Duke (2000) implies this when he writes that "Student involvement and experiential learning are critical components of successful instruction." Ramsey (2000), who also wishes to validate "culturally diverse styles of communication and participation," suggests that teachers "use a wide range of instructional methods to engage students in the learning process. These methods include lectures, take-home cultural self-assessment inventories, experiential exercises, simulations, role plays, case studies, informational videotapes, and live or taped multicultural counseling session demonstrations." Cheryl Bluestone (2000) also notes this typical passiveness in pedagogy and suggests that feature films in the classroom help overcome this.

An integral part of the active involvement paradigm is the level of student or trainee expertise. It should be noted that while film awareness is fairly broad among students, game playing or simulations often required significant preparation in order for students to learn the rules of the game, the process of role playing, or the technology

required as part of the simulation. This issue of time is significant. Many teachers or trainers have noted that group work and game playing or simulations are time-intensive. More importantly, adult students at the graduate level or workers in a corporate or industry setting may not readily accept the personal commitment that role playing or simulation requires. As Constance Seidner (1995) comments in referring to her personal experience with role-playing games, "Students were, for the most part, engaged and responsive. It was not everyone's cup of tea, and there were some students who felt uncomfortable with the uncertainty and the risks associated with entering into a make-believe environment."

Advantages and Disadvantages of Role Playing or Simulation Games

Role-playing or simulation games, such as Bafa Bafa, have often shown themselves to be effective, although one study (Bruschke and Gartner, 1993) suggests that it has the potential to increase ethnocentrism rather than to increase cultural sensitivity. Not only are simulations readily available, but, as Fowler (1994) notes, they provide shared experience and a safe haven. Moreover, such games have become widely used in business schools and industry. A. J. Faria (1998) reports that 97.5% of AACSB member schools are using simulations in business courses while 62.2% of 8,750 corporations using simulations. Furthermore, student reactions to such games are generally positive.

However, there is a clear issue of time management. Bafa Bafa takes at least 3 hours to run well. Long blocks of time are not always available in a classroom setting nor would such an intensive investment of time be seen as effective in many work place training sessions. As Seidner (1995) comments on her experience with such simulations:

"It seemed that we were always running out of time." In addition, effective role playing games require adequate debriefing (Hofstede and Pedersen, 1999). More importantly, as one recent researcher has noted (Petranek, 2000), the typical oral debriefing that accompanies simulations is often inadequate. A written debriefing is essential to maximize the effectiveness. However this requires a greater time commitment both on the part of the trainee and the trainer to provide feedback on the written debriefing. Finally, a liability of many role-playing games is that they often take place in isolation from a student's or employee's real-life situation (Seidner 1995).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Feature Film in the Classroom

While feature films also have distinct disadvantages, notably similar time constraints as well as copyright restrictions, there are a number of significant advantages. These advantages include the ability to connect with a known reality, the ability to build on pre-existing student skills, a clearer promotion of specific cross-cultural sensitivity, meeting specific class, individual, or regional needs, and effective entertainment value.

Time constraints are a serious issue but the use of group projects help ameliorate this in the classroom or in longer training sessions. One day training sessions, however, may have insufficient time for such an approach since film-based group projects typically require several days for viewing and preparation. Many teachers or trainers may also shy away from feature films because of copyright restrictions. While there are some limitations, which may have a greater bearing on corporate training, Joseph Champoux (1999) helps to clarify the situation for most classroom and non-profit settings:

> The copyright act allows showing a copyrighted film or portion of a copyrighted film during the regular course of instruction. This showing

> must happen in a regular classroom of a nonprofit educational institution. Either the class instructor or students in the class can show the film as part of an instructional activity. You cannot charge a fee for viewing the film or scene, nor can you open the event to the public. A legal copy of the film or scenes must be used. This provision usually means an authorized copy you rent or buy or one for which you have a license to copy.

Unlike role-playing games, feature films have the advantage of directly connecting with student experience. Feature films, even when fictitious, still portray a visual reality and, even if not fact-based, give the appearance of reality. Essentially, films are perceived as real. In addition, most students already have substantial practice in understanding and analyzing film. Because film is such an integral part of most student's experience, instructors rarely have to spend much time explaining how to understand and analyze film.

A significant enhancement occurs when the teacher / trainer (or in the case of group projects, the group itself) connects previously studied concepts with the real-life situation inherent in the film experience. Bluestone (2000) notes that "films, when linked conceptually to the content of a curriculum, can increase students' involvement." She also focuses on the enhancement of "connected learning" as seen in the following comment:

> Many women and ethnic minority students may feel disempowered by "separate learning," which is characterized by abstract analysis, "objective" observation, and a focus on the mastery of "factual" material. In contrast, connected learning emphasizes sharing ideas, personal

> experiences, and empathy with others. In connected teaching, sharing one's thoughts about ideas is valued as much as or more than merely presenting factual "knowledge."

Implicit in Bluestone's comment on "connected learning" is the need for a medium that promotes sharing of ideas, personal experiences, and the development of empathy. Feature films, particularly in connection with group projects as described below, appear to provide both an appropriate medium and an effective methodology. While noting the practical difficulties (particularly time constraints) and thus suggesting films as take-home projects, Bluestone also notes that "watching an entire film in class may be worth the time spent." Anecdotal graduate and undergraduate student comments support this.

Feature films also have the ability to allow learning on multiple levels – including the visual and aural. This is implicit in the comment of Champoux (1999) who writes of the "unique features of film that make it an uncommonly powerful teaching tool." He notes in particular that "Viewers are not passive observers." He goes on to stress that "the use of multiple media to show the same concepts . . . has positive cumulative effects," and that "visual media make concepts more accessible to a person than text media and help with later recall." Thus, a significant advantage of feature films is the inherent visualization of theoretical concepts. See also Higgins and Dermer (2001) who comment that "Movies have some advantages over traditional methods in reinforcing perceptual, conceptual, and executive skills," particularly through the opportunity for multiple viewings.

Another significant aspect of feature films is their specific cultural focus. Instructors have the flexibility to choose films which meet a particular class need. If an Hispanic or Asian focus is needed, it is easier to choose films which reflect that interest rather than to attempt to transfer differing cultural traits when explaining their applicability to a theory.

Finally, feature films provide a significant level of entertainment often missing from theory. Not only is there a memorable story line which aids recall, there is also the visual enhancement in the portrayal of culturally specific places, culturally specific dress and deportment, and culturally specific conflicts.

In summary, feature films, despite time constraints and the occasional copyright issue, have the advantages of connecting directly with student experience and aptitude for film study, of allowing learning on multiple levels (aural and visual), of providing a specific cultural focus, and of enhancing learning through entertainment.

Methodology of Film-Based Group Projects

For the past three years, film-based group projects have been the capstone to my undergraduate intercultural communications course. The following explains the nature of this course, group makeup, group presentation expectations, and results.

Course and Class Makeup: The course in which I assign film-based group projects is Multicultural Business Relations, an elective undergraduate business course. The class is composed of third and fourth year students. Class size has ranged from 6 to 18 (but generally is 12 -14). Classes tend to be broadly diverse with representation from across the United States (typically it has included Asian-American, African-American, and Hispanic students) as well as significant representation from European, Asian,

African, Caribbean, and South American cultures. In fact, Anglo-Americans have often been under represented – usually less than 25% of the class.

Group Makeup: Midway through the course after the section devoted to the concepts of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, Hall, and Hofstede, students are asked to divide into self-chosen groups of 4-5 students. The two basic ground rules for all groups are: 1) Groups are expected, when possible, to be cultural diverse. This has never been a problem since a broad cultural diversity is a norm at the university. 2) The film chosen by the group may not reflect the culture of the majority of the group (e.g. a group with a predominantly American-Chinese makeup may not choose *The Joy Luck Club*).

Logistics: Film choice is on a first-come, first-choose basis. The instructor has purchased and provides the films to the group. Groups view the film outside of class time – preferably as a group viewing. Groups have three to four weeks to view and prepare their presentation. Several presentations are scheduled on the same day during the last days of the course.

Group Presentations: Each group is required to prepare a 15-20 minute multi-media presentation (using PowerPoint / overheads and video clips). The expected focus of the presentation is an explication of the culture concepts and issues found in the film. Presentations are expected to include 2-3 short illustrative film clips (up to a maximum of 5 minutes).

Results: Using video and audio clips, posters, dress, performance, and even food, most presentations have focused on how the movie illustrates cultural traits found in Hofstede, Hall, and Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck. Most groups remark on how their viewing of the movie has changed as a result of prior course content. Although plot and

characterization are still important, presenters note that scenes which may have missed their notice now stand out as culturally significant. Students confirm what Champoux (1999) emphasizes when he writes that "Students can see the theories and concepts in action. In more than a figurative sense, theories and concepts leap from the screen." An important unintended effect arises from the use and promotion of multicultural groups. Working with individuals of different cultures in preparing group project presentations has strengthened the level of cultural sensitivity. Students typically demonstrate sensitivity to the viewpoints from group members of other cultures. Student reaction has been especially positive toward improved intercultural communication skills developed.

Movie Illustration and Insights. A recent small group film presentation used the recent movie *Fools Rush In*. In a nutshell, *Fools Rush In* is a fairy-tale comedy. Isabel Fuentes (Salma Hayek), a Hispanic photographer in a casino and Alex Whitman (Matthew Perry), a WASP who has just moved from New York City to supervise the setup and opening of a trendy nightclub, portray culture-crossed lovers who eventually overcome their cultural differences and live happily ever after. Although somewhat simplistic, *Fools Rush In* demonstrates to students that cross-cultural communication is effective when each side grasps the cultural meanings of the other. In their presentations, students emphasize the relationship between theory and the movie experience. They note the application of Hofstede's dimensions, notably individualism and collectivism and masculinity / femininity as they apply to the experiences of Isabel and Alex. They also show links to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's activity, world view, and time orientations. For instance, presentations usually focus on cultural differences in work attitudes as depicted in Isabel and Alex's first disagreement about moving to New York. Isabel

remarks: "My friends are here, my family is here, my work is here! . . . My life is in Las Vegas." Alex responds, " And my work is in New York." Students connect this conflict with Hofstede's high / low masculinity differentiations between those who "work to live" versus those who "live to work." (Hofstsede, 2001, p 318).

Three scenes in particular are noteworthy. In the first meeting of Isabel and Alex at a Las Vegas restaurant, students note contrasting world views as portrayed in Isabel's strong religious beliefs and in her acceptance of destiny. This contrasts with Alex's non-committal perspective that one is one's own destiny. A second major scene, which students typically chose as a film clip to show the whole class, is Alex's first meeting with Isabel's family. On arriving, he comments, after seeing a crowd of 20+ people, "This is a family dinner?" Isabel responds, "I guess a lot of people couldn't make it." Students see the connection with both Hofstede and Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck use this incident to reemphasize the importance of family in collectivistic Hispanic cultures, in contrast to the Anglo emphasis on individualism and privacy as seen in Alex's attitudes.

Finally, there is the turning point of the movie which reemphasizes the cultural concept of destiny and shows the transference of understanding. In the movie, Alex and Isabel have separated. The emphasis on destiny, which Alex finally understands, occurs as he considers reconnecting with an old girl friend. The episode begins with a sidewalk priest in New York telling Alex that "There are signs everywhere." Shortly afterwards, he sees a Chihuahua on the street, reminding him of Cujo, Isabel's Chihuahua. He then sees a billboard picture of the Grand Canyon, Isabel's favorite photography locale as well as the site where they celebrated his last birthday. Finally a young Hispanic girl, coincidentally named Isabel, smiles at him. The effect of this epiphany experience is his

rejection of his WASP family and old girl friend, a mad dash to Mexico and then to Hoover Dam to find Isabel. While students have remarked on the coincidental nature of this episode, they still note that it captures the growth of cultural sensitivity and the development of effective cross-cultural communication skills.

Recommendations and Further Research

Group projects involving film are time effective in that they require minimal in-class time, are easily managed, and promote active learning. As a result of such projects, students become engaged and make a clear connection between theory and practice. While the negative factors, including time constraints and the potential for an ineffective presentation to the entire class group because of weak small-group skills, need to be considered, the ability for students to connect with a specific culture, the wide-spread availability of suitable feature films, and the broad entertainment value make film-based group projects a significant enhancement to cross-cultural sensitivity training.

The following films have also been used or have the potential for developing cross-cultural sensitivity: *Close to Eden*, *Gung Ho*, *Iron and Silk*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Mississippi Masala*, *Moscow on the Hudson*, *My Family*, *Remember the Titans*.

Further research on sensitivity development comparing a class using film-based group projects with a control group in a more traditional intercultural communication course would be helpful in determining more fully the effectiveness of such film-based group projects. Such a study would also benefit from collecting a broader sample of students responses (by requesting qualitative non-graded feed-back on the effectiveness of the group projects) as well as a more systematic analysis using a Likert scale approach.

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